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## **Mennonite communities in Belize**

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the entrepreneurial activities within different Mennonite communities in Belize and the way religious differentiation plays a role in their entrepreneurship. In spite of the fact that most Mennonites live quite isolated from the wider society, building upon their Christian beliefs, agricultural skills and a strong working ethos, they have been able to establish a strong and stable economic position within Belize. The paper specifically focuses on the interplay between religious and entrepreneurial differentiation and the way this influences the progressiveness of different Mennonite communities.

**Keywords:** Belize; Mennonite identity; religion; entrepreneurs; community and differentiation.

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**Biographical notes:** Carel Roessingh studied Cultural Anthropology and received his PhD at the University of Utrecht. His PhD research was on the Belizean Garifuna. His central research topic focuses on the organisational activities of the Mennonites in Belize. He is Senior Lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Culture, Organisation and Management.

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### **1 Introduction**

In economic analyses entrepreneurs are often seen as agents who play a role in the arena of the market in which they make decisions to organise productive activities and are seen as the main risk bearers, innovators and industrial leaders (Ripsas, 1998). From this perspective entrepreneurial actions are taken solely to make a profit and have a highly capitalist nature. This would suggest that a combination with something like Christianity is rather contradictory. Especially when it comes to orthodox Christians. After all, their fundamental values and daily practices are based on the message of God and the scripture of the Bible. Basically one of the messages of Christianity is that people should live in acceptance with other people without gaining or pursuing too many personal advantages. The question thus rises whether and if so, it is possible for someone who is practicing

Christianity in an orthodox manner to unite his or her religious values with an entrepreneurial attitude? Dodd and Seaman (1998) demonstrate in a study about British entrepreneurs that there is a complex and interdependent relationship between religion and enterprises. They even argue that religion has a purifying role in the relation between entrepreneurs and their environment. The objectives of entrepreneurs with a religious background are not exclusively focused on the profits. Thus in their view, the link between religion and entrepreneurship is not so contradictory as would be suggested from an economic point of view. Similarly, in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", Weber (2002) argues that there is a relation between Christianity and the development of rational capitalism due to a so-called Calvinistic working ethos. The sober life style is, he argues, contributing to the entrepreneurial success. It is possible to draw a parallel between this line of argument and other religious movements like the Mennonites. Their religious values and traditions have a strong influence on their entrepreneurial behaviour. As Redekop et al. point out:

"Behind the stories of Mennonite businesses and businesspeople lie tales of individual and collective struggles: the struggle to reconcile the accumulation of personal wealth with responsibilities to the collective good; the struggle to reconcile the autonomy and self-interest of the individual with a traditional group authority; the struggle with individualism and commitment." (Redekop et al., 1995, p.4)

In this paper this relationship between religious values and entrepreneurial activities will be explored by focusing on the entrepreneurial behaviour of Mennonite communities in the Central American country Belize. With an area of 22,965 km<sup>2</sup> and 232,111 inhabitants, Belize is one of the smallest and least populated countries in Central America (Central Statistical Office, 2000). Yet the country has a great diversity of ethnic communities, including several groups of orthodox Mennonites. Interestingly enough, these Mennonites are notably present in the entrepreneurial arena of the country. Because of their strong entrepreneurial position, the Mennonites are commonly regarded as the economic motor of Belize (Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd, 2005). Mennonites symbolise soundness and reliability and therefore Belizeans are eager to do business with them. This is especially true for the Mennonites of Spanish Lookout, in the Cayo district in western Belize and the Mennonites of Blue Creek, in the Orange Walk district in northern Belize. But how do the Mennonites integrate their strong economic position with their religious and traditional way of living?

The data presented in this paper are the result of several periods of ethnographic research conducted in Belize between 2002 and 2005. Combined with archival sources, several other qualitative research methods were used to obtain insight into the religious and entrepreneurial changes within several Mennonite communities in Belize. These research methods include participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with people who can be considered central figures in the entrepreneurial life of this community, people who have a central position in the religious life and other players in the field of research. The research subject was approached as a case study with an intrinsic as well as an instrumental focus (Stake, 2003). This means that the case is used to provide an insight into this particular subject (entrepreneurial differentiation within the different Mennonite communities), as well as to facilitate the understanding of a more general issue (the impact of religious differentiation on the entrepreneurial system). The purpose of the study is to gain an

understanding of the situation within its context, rather than generalisation beyond (Stake, 2003).

## **2 The Mennonites as a cohesive group within the Anabaptist movement**

The Mennonites derive their name from Menno Simon (1496–1561). This Catholic priest from the village Witmarsum in the western part of Friesland in the Netherlands converted, in 1536, to the Anabaptist movement. Menno Simons became, through his writings, one of the most important leaders of the Anabaptist movement. This movement has its origin in a ‘religio-social rebellion’ in Europe during the 16th century (Redekop, 1989, p.6). The Anabaptists emerged in Switzerland, during a time of important social and religious conflicts in Europe.

On the 31 October of 1517 the monk Martin Luther nailed 95 statements on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (Loewen and Nolt, 1996). This was the sign for big changes in Europe where most countries were indoctrinated by the influence of the Catholic Church. It was the end of the dominant position of the Catholic Church in the northern part of Europe. The Reformation movement started to play a leading role in the religious and the political arena of different countries in Europe. Yet, soon thereafter, one of the leaders of the reformist movement in Switzerland (Ulrich Zwingli) was highly criticised by a group of his followers. This group was skeptical towards the conservative attitude of their leader toward some principles, like for example the rejection of infant baptism, non-resistance and the separation between State and Church (Loewen and Nolt, 1996). These critiques led to the break between this group and the reformation movement. After their breakaway, the Anabaptists, as they were soon called, spread rapidly across Europe (Germany, France, Austria and The Netherlands) (Dyck, 1993; Kraybill and Bowman, 2001; Wenger, 1992).

From the beginning there has been significant differentiation within the Anabaptist movement with regard to religious principles, ideas and opinions (Urry, 1989). One of the earliest schisms was the breakaway of the followers of Jacob Ammann (the Amish) from the movement in 1693 (Kraybill, 1989; Hostetler, 1993). Other groups within the Anabaptist movement are the Brethren and the Hutterites. A specific group of Anabaptists around Menno Simons, situated in the Northern part of the Netherlands and Germany, were a cohesive group that were soon called “the followers of Menno”; the Mennonites.

The Mennonites, as other Anabaptist groups are not organised in churches but in congregations or communities (Redekop, 1989). Among the Mennonites the concept of community (Gemeinde) has been and still is very important. The Mennonite community provides

“the context for individuals and families to live and interact together so that the norms become entrenched. Furthermore, the community provides the basis for the economic, political, and social activity which allows for the emergence and perpetuation of the Mennonite congregation as well as its expansion.” (Redekop, 1989, p.13)

Through their strict doctrine of religious principles and their strong cohesive communities the Mennonites were often seen as enemies by the ruling churches and governments of Europe. The Protestant and Catholic institutions persecuted them and this led the Mennonites to migrate to areas where they could continue to live in peace.

### 3 The Mennonites and their road to Belize

The migration led the Mennonites first to Poland and Prussia and then to Russia, where they settled in large Colonies, such as the Chortitza Colony and the Molotschna Colony, in what is now the Ukraine (Dyck, 1993; Kroeker, 2005; Loewen, 1993, 2001; Plett, 1999). In Russia the Mennonites emphasised their German and Dutch origins, which set them apart from the Russian society. As a result their presence in Russia was continuously under discussion, depending on the leading powers. Under the regime of Tsar Alexander II the Mennonites were eventually threatened to be included once and for all into the Russian administrative and military system (Loewen, 1993; Sawatzky, 1971). This was the moment that a group of the most traditional Mennonites decided to migrate to Canada.

Between 1874 and 1880 around 7000 Mennonites moved to Canada where they settled in the province of Manitoba. Yet even here the Mennonites could not escape the changing rules of the authorities. In 1916 the government of Manitoba passed the School Attendance Act. "The Act stated that all children between the ages of 7 and 14 must attend public schools and receive their education in English" (Loewen, 1990, p.390). This meant that the Mennonites could not live as an independent community anymore, which was one of their main values. Therefore, the most conservative Mennonites refused to send their children to public schools and in 1922 this group packed their bags again, this time to move to Durango and Chihuahua in Mexico. For instance, in 1924 a number of *Kleine Gemeinde* families moved from Kansas to settle themselves near the Chihuahua Old Colony communities (Quiring, 2003). After that (between 1947 and 1952) several other groups of Mennonites followed this movement to Mexico because of

"growing sentiments against them (due to their German – 'enemy' – heritage and their exemption from military service), a government policy aimed at assimilation, land shortage and internal differences over 'worldliness'." (Scharinger-Plasil, 2004, p.15).

The concept 'worldliness' needs some explanation. Loewen (1993, p.17) explains that 'the search to maintain the old ideology of "separation from the world" in this changing environment' is a basic principle that can cause internal disputes about which are the rules to keep "separate from the world" and whom or what are influences from the outside world, the worldliness, which are not acceptable for the community.

However, after being faced with the threat of being incorporated into the Mexican social security system several groups of Mennonites started to look for yet another homeland; somewhere where they could live according to their own rules and belief. They found such a place in British Honduras with which an agreement was signed in 1957 leading to the migration of several Mennonite groups (*Altkolonier*, *Sommerfelder* and *Kleine Gemeinde*) to this British colony (Everitt, 1983; Sawatzky, 1971). The Mennonites were granted freedom to administer their own colonies and exemption from military service in exchange for producing food for the local market and for export (Sawatzky, 1971). In 1958 the first group of Old Colony Mennonites from Mexico arrived in British Honduras to settle in Blue Creek and Shipyard in the Orange Walk District (Everitt, 1983; Sawatzky, 1971). In the same year another group, the *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites, who also migrated from Mexico, settled in a place called Spanish Lookout in the Cayo District (Higdon, 1997; Quiring, 1961; Sawatzky, 1971).

The Mennonites who settled in Blue Creek and Shipyard were members of the Old Colony Mennonites (Altkolonier Mennoniten Gemeinde), who emerged due to a schism in the Mennonite settlements in Canada in the 1870s. Quiring (2003) points out that the name Old Colony derives from the Chortitza Colony in southern Russia because it was the oldest colony of the Mennonites in Russia. Eventually the name Old Colony was used by outsiders to refer to “those people who were loyal to a rigid belief-system and a traditional way of life and was adopted consequently by the members themselves” (Redekop, 1969, p.10). In that sense, they were considered to be one of the more conservative streams within the Mennonites.

The Mennonites who settled in Spanish Lookout were members of the Kleine Gemeinde congregation. A young minister by the name Klaas Reimer founded this congregation in 1812 as a reaction to the developments within the Russian Mennonite church. (Loewen, 1990, 1993, 2001; Plett, 1999). In those days, the Kleine Gemeinde community was known for its conservative attitude. In 1874, the Kleine Gemeinde migrated to Manitoba (Canada) and Nebraska (USA) as a response to the increasing pressure of the Russian Government. While traditionally the Kleine Gemeinde communities were known for their conservative attitude, by the time they moved to British Honduras they had already started to change their rules and attitudes.

The first years of the Mennonites in British Honduras were difficult and full of new experiences. The description by Koop, a prominent Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite of the Spanish Lookout community, in his book “The Pioneer Years in Belize” provides a dramatic picture:

“After a weary and tiring journey, they [the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites] arrived on the southern bank of the Belize River at the present side of Spanish Lookout’s southern edge. Neither bridge nor ferry awaited them. On the northern bank of the river was a dark and forbidding jungle with its strange noises and smells. Underneath the dense bush, giant snakes and jaguars made their home. The apprehensive settlers may had thoughts akin to those of the Children of Israel in Numbers 14 : 3: ‘Why did the Lord bring us to this land to allow us to fall by the sword (tropical diseases)? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Would it not have been better for us to return to Egypt?’” (Koop, 1991, p.vii)

After some initial hardships and difficulties of adapting to the unfamiliar tropical climate of British Honduras some communities like Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek expanded into large economically successful agricultural communities, which have, with their products, a significant share within the internal local market (Driedger, 1958; Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd, 2005). In an analysis of the agricultural system of the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites in Spanish Lookout in Belize, Hall (1980) mentions some cultural factors, which explain the economic success of this community and its organisations. These factors are group cohesion, the existence of a strong religion, a high degree of social organisation, a self-sufficient economy and a low threshold for migration. These factors also apply to other Mennonites communities in Belize like Shipyard and Springfield, but in contrast to Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek these communities are not important players within the local market of Belize.

#### 4 Mennonites in Belize

The country that the Mennonites entered in 1958 was at that time a British colony. In 1964, British Honduras received the right to an internal self-government and in 1973 the name of the country was changed into Belize. On 21 September, 1981, Belize became independent (Roessingh, 2001). The country has a multi-ethnic population consisting of Mestizos, Creoles, Garinagu, Maya's, Taiwanese, Chinese and East Indian, among others. According to the census of 2000, 3.6% of Belize's inhabitants are Mennonites – which comes down to 8276 people. However, the 2000 census indicates that there are 9497 religious Mennonites (4.1%) in this multi-religious country (Central Statistical Office, 2000). The difference between the percentages of ethnic and religious Mennonites is at least something that requires an explanation. In practice Mennonite identity turns out to be a dual concept (Roessingh and Boersma, 2003). The ethnic identity of the Mennonites is based on a combination of shared assumptions on life values and life style. The Mennonites in Belize share their common descent from Western Europe, especially the Netherlands and Germany. The religious identity, on the other hand, is based on the way they interpret and use the Christian belief to fulfil their life. This implies that also native Belizeans can be part of the Mennonite church.

Today the Mennonites of Belize still live in remote communities scattered throughout the West and North of the country (mainly Orange Walk and Cayo District).

“Settlement in large, exclusive, self-regulating ‘colonies’ with a relatively unsophisticated and linguistically, culturally and ethnically different *Umwelt* have proven most capable of long term survival – under these conditions the Mennonites established cultural solidarity and a distinct folk identity.” (Sawatzky, 1971, p.2)

Loewen (1993, 2001) argues that this form of community was developed in Russia and proved most successful for the creation of a different cultural identity and long-term survival in countries to which the Mennonites migrated. So, when the Mennonites arrived in Belize they started to settle in the way best known and best adapted to their needs. Ever since their arrival in 1958, all eleven Mennonite communities in Belize (see Table 1) locate themselves on the edge of or even outside the wider society (Bolland, 1986).

**Table 1** Mennonite communities in Belize

<i>Inhabitants</i>	<i>&lt;100</i>	<i>100–500</i>	<i>500–1000</i>	<i>1000–2000</i>	<i>2000–3000</i>
Communities	Pilgrimage Valley, Pine Hill, Richmond Hill	Lower Barton Creek, Springfield, Upper Barton Creek	Blue Creek, Indian Creek	Spanish Lookout	Little Belize, Shipyard

In 1976 Grant argues that the Mennonites in Belize are “perhaps the cultural group which occupies the most marginal position within the political and social system” (Grant, 1976, p.13).

The marginal position of the Mennonites is consolidated through their ethnic identity which is based on their common descent, their ‘white’ phenotypic features, their Anabaptist religion, their shared cultural and social repertoires, their common life style and shared principles like the system of a set of common rules and discipline (*Ordnung*) and an ideology to live ‘separated from the world’ (Roessingh and Boersma, 2003).

For example, within the boundaries of their communities the Mennonites speak a language called 'low German'. With outsiders they speak English or Spanish. Language is an instrument to exclude oneself from society.

Due to their ideology to live 'separated from the world' most of the Mennonites in Belize are not willing to participate in the wider social system of the country they live in: they send their children to their own schools, they do not vote or take part in the political system and when there are problems that only affect the community, they generally regulate these among themselves. The only way they take part in Belizean society is through business and entrepreneurship. Interesting enough this socially and politically marginal position of the Mennonites seems to be exactly what the Belizean government had in mind when they negotiated with the Mennonite delegation over the conditions under which they would be granted land in the country. After all, the Mennonites promised that they would produce food for local consumption. Most Mennonites are still farmers or in some way linked to agriculture. They produce food to be sold on the local markets and even in the big supermarkets in the cities. Some Mennonite companies like Bel Car Export even deliver their products to Mexico, Jamaica and other countries in the Caribbean. The Mennonite entrepreneurs dominate the national market for milk and dairy products as well as poultry. The Mennonites take a certain kind of pride out of their dominant position on the local market. As a farmer stated: "Before we came there was nothing".

The market is the main place for interaction between Mennonites and other groups within Belize. Mennonites go to the cities quite often to sell their products and to shop in the stores or to make use of services that are not available in their own community. For example they do not have their own post offices, while most Mennonites also use the Belizean banking system. However, some communities like Blue Creek and Spanish Lookout nowadays have their own banks, accessible only for Mennonites from that particular community. Apart from the business market interaction with other people of Belize takes place on the labour market, as many Mennonites employ local people on their farms. In general locals are happy to work for the Mennonites, as they are known to pay higher wages than average employers.

Generally, speaking one could say that apart from their entrepreneurial interactions, the Mennonites stay mostly among themselves, minding their own business and taking care of their own affairs. It seems that in some Mennonite communities like Spanish Lookout some changes in the ideology of living separated from the world are taking place, as young people go to the cities more often for entertainment. This means that the chance to meet people with another ethnic background increases. Jantzen (1987) noted 20 years ago that there are cases of marriage in Belize between Mestizos and Mennonites, although even nowadays this is more an exception than common.

The attitude of Mennonites and other ethnic groups in Belize towards each other is coloured by stereotypes, prejudices and rumours on both sides. For instance, many Belizeans think that the Mennonites are exempted from paying taxes. This is not true; the Mennonites do pay land and income tax. But this old prejudice about them just does not go away. Another well-known stereotype is that the Mennonites are very hard to negotiate with and that they only want to sell and never want to buy something from non-Mennonites. Apart from the prejudices based on the special position of the Mennonites within Belizean society, there are also prejudices with regard to their religion.



The contradiction between assumed religiousness and actual behaviour of the Mennonites is often used as an argument to show that the Mennonites are not so religious as they say they are. On the one hand this is based on their statements about religion: “they say that they are holy but whenever I see them they drink and smoke”. On the other hand it is also based on the inconsistency between their religious principles and the way they live by these principles. The Old Colony Mennonites of Shipyard have

“a strict system of the Ordnung, a set of rules that regulates almost every aspect of their lives, from the way people have to be dressed, to the use of modern technology, down to the naming of the children.” (Plasil and Roessingh, 2006, p.45)

This means for instance that these Mennonites are not allowed to drive an automobile, so when they have to go to a city they can take the bus, arrange a drive with somebody who is allowed to drive or hitchhike. The fact that they are not allowed to drive an automobile themselves, but when necessary they are allowed to sit beside somebody who drives an automobile, is something, which many non-Mennonites think is very contradictory. What is more, it gives cause for all kind of prejudices. When talking about these kinds of rules one Belizean (non-Mennonite) informant cynically noted: “They do not drive cars themselves but they are willing to sit next to a female driver”.

Mennonites in turn, also have their prejudices towards other ethnic groups in Belize. Afro-Belizeans (Creoles and Garinagu) are labelled by some Mennonites as lazy, not willing to work. One can not rely on the Afro-Belizeans, they are never on time and you never know if they will come to their work or not. Mestizos, especially refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador are generally seen as better workers, more reliable and are therefore more accepted. “Those Ladinos from Guatemala know how to handle the machete” was the remark of a Mennonite from Spanish Lookout.

All these prejudices reinforce the fact that Mennonites in Belize stay mostly among themselves, minding their own business and taking care of their own affairs. The consequence is that outsiders are looked up on with suspicion. In 2005 an oil company found oil and started drilling within the borders of the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. The consequence was that in and outside the community people started to ask questions. Most of the questions were about who was earning most money out of the oil production, the Government, the oil company, or the Mennonites. For instance some Belizeans outside the community believed that the Mennonites would earn a lot of money due to the oilfields. Mennonites in Spanish Lookout on the other hand complained that while the Government and the oil company made a good profit out of the oil, the oil company caused much nuisance and people got sick of the air pollution due to the oil drilling. “The Government can not be trusted because in matters like these, they do not care for the well-being of the Mennonites. The Government is only interested in economic advantage of the oil fields”: was a remark of a Mennonite. A Mennonite lady said: “When people get sick of the pollution and the Government is not doing anything maybe it is time to go back to Canada”. In this case it is obviously clear that interference of the outside world and especially the role of the Government is viewed with suspicion and sarcasm.

## 5 Entrepreneurial and religious differentiation among three Mennonite communities in Belize

Many Belizeans consider Mennonites and their communities as a uniform social and religious group. But taking a closer look, one can see that there is a lot of variation between the different Mennonite communities in Belize. Strong conflicting opinions exist of the way one should interpret the Bible and if new technology or social changes should be accepted or not, as a consequence there are processes of religious and social differentiation going on between and within the Mennonite communities. There are some Mennonite communities like Springfield that are rather isolated with a strong inward focus. In this small village with approximately 150 inhabitants the church has a very strong central position in social and religious structure of community. The interpretation of the Bible is controlled by the leaders of church. They are very careful in picking out people they interact with, afraid as they are for bad influences from the outside world. Other Mennonite communities like for instance Spanish Lookout have more interactions with other people of the Belizean society. Interactions with non-Mennonites have invoked innovations on different levels: from social changes to innovations on technology. Beside these interactions with non-Mennonites most Mennonites have relatives and/or followers of the same church in other communities in Belize or in other countries, like Mexico, Canada and the USA. Because of this most Mennonite communities are related and connected on some level. Beside kinship relationships, the Mennonite communities in Belize can be divided in three groups, along their religious and entrepreneurial position. From a religious point of view one can make a differentiation on the amount of different churches within the community (see Table 2). From an entrepreneurial point of view one can make a differentiation in the way the community accept innovations in entrepreneurship and technology. This perspective consist of the *progressive* Kleine Gemeinde and EMMC communities like Spanish Lookout, the *traditional* Old Colony communities like Shipyard and the *conservative* Amish Mennonite communities like Springfield (see Table 3).

Looking at the three groups of Mennonite communities, as displayed above, this section of the paper will focus more in detail on three specific communities, each representing one of the main streams. As stated before the Mennonite internal system is organised around a congregation, which is the basic social and religious unity beyond the extended family. Congregations with common rules and discipline “participate in the same conference, which is an organisational unit held together by a biannual meeting of ordained leaders” (Kraybill and Bowman, 2001, p.68). In Springfield for instance, which is a small community there is one congregation but in Shipyard and Spanish Lookout, which are larger communities there are more congregations. But first of all are Mennonites members of a community. The dynamics of religious changes and differentiations within and between the communities and the differences between the communities in the way the entrepreneurs do their business with the outside world is reflected in the context in which each community is embedded. In this paper three different communities will be described to illustrate these differences. As shown in the Table 1 there are eleven Mennonites communities in Belize with different numbers of inhabitants, but also with different religious ideologies (Table 2) and entrepreneurial initiatives and businesses (Table 3). The first community which will be focused on is Springfield, a rather small community (see Table 1). Founded in 1996 the inhabitants of Springfield make their living out of horticulture and cattle breeding. The second

community that will be described is Shipyard, one of the first settlements in the country. Most inhabitants of Shipyard make a living out of farming, agricultural related labour and the furniture manufacturing. The third community is Spanish Lookout, one of the first settlements in Belize that expanded from an agricultural to an economically successful community with prominent national businesses.

**Table 2** Religious differentiation of Mennonite communities in Belize

<i>Religious differentiation</i>	<i>One church</i>	<i>Two churches</i>	<i>Three churches</i>
Communities	<i>Old Colony:</i> LowerBarton Creek, Little Belize, Indian Creek  <i>Amish Mennonite:</i> Springfield, PineHill, Pilgrimage Valley, Richmond Hill, UpperBarton Creek	<i>Old Colony, EMMC:</i> Shipyard	<i>Kleine Gemeinde, EMMC, Lokal Church:</i> Spanish Lookout, Blue Creek

**Table 3** Mainstream entrepreneurial differentiation in Mennonite communities in Belize

<i>Use of technology</i>	<i>Conservative:</i> Machinery on horsepower. Use of horse drawn wagons. No electricity and modern equipment	<i>Traditional:</i> Use of agricultural machinery, tractors, without pneumatic tyres. Use of horse drawn wagons. No automobiles and equipment which is related with the modern world	<i>Progressive:</i> Use of agricultural machinery, tractors and harvester with pneumatic tyres. Use of automobiles and Computers
Communities	LowerBarton Creek, Springfield, PineHill, Pilgrimage Valley, Richmond Hill, UpperBarton Creek	Shipyard, Little Belize, Indian Creek	Spanish Lookout, Blue Creek

### 5.1 Community 1: Springfield

The road to Springfield is dusty, bumpy and unpaved. Once you enter the village the road becomes a cart track. Springfield is a small community, which was founded because of the land shortage in the Barton Creek area in the Cayo District. Upper Barton Creek and Springfield Mennonites are connected by family ties. This connection is a result of the population growth of Upper Barton Creek and internal migration of Lower Barton Creek families (Schneider, 1990). Quite simply, there was nowhere for Upper Barton Creek to expand, the occasional small parcel notwithstanding. With so many youth coming onto age and young couples in need of land, it became necessary to find new farming land (Nippert, 1994).

The Mennonites of Springfield, Upper Barton Creek and Pine Hill in the Toledo District are conservative in their lifestyle.

“Their reasons for migrating to this quite isolated area are many and varied, but they are basically conservative and dislike association with other Mennonites in Belize, Mexico and Canada who have become too worldly.” (Everitt, 1983, p.89)

The Mennonites of Springfield use horse drawn wagons. The small farms lie scattered between the hillsides of the Maya Mountains. The houses are small and modest.

Their fields are more like horticultural land. In contrast with other Mennonite communities, Springfield look tranquil. Springfield stretches over an area of 1432 acres. The community counts approximately 150 inhabitants divided over 23 families.

The Bishop, minister and the deacon are the most powerful persons in the community, with its Amish Mennonite church. They are the ideological, religious as well as the secular level the leaders. Beside this organisational body there is the school council. This council is responsible for executive activities, like the conservation of the wooden school and church building, but also the maintenance of the road in and around the community. The school council is also the organisation that maintains the contact with the government and institutions of the 'outside world' such as wholesale buyers of their horticultural products (Lentjes, 2004).

The Springfield Mennonites are not allowed to use machinery or electricity. Everything in this community is based on strict rules on plainness and modesty and their interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Horsepower drives the sawmill in Springfield, which is owned by the people of the community. All the transport is done by horse drawn wagons. The Springfield Mennonites make their living out of small-scale farming and agriculture. The main crops are beans, corn, cane, potato's peanuts and melon. Other products, which the Mennonites cultivate for the market, are honey and fruit trees. Most of the Mennonite farmers have some cattle, such as cows, pigs and chicken. Their entrepreneurial activities are based on small-scale trade with outsiders. The Springfield Mennonites sell some of their products, like the fruit trees and honey, on the nearest market, which is the capital of Belize, Belmopan.

Aside from some religion-based exchanges with Mennonite groups in Paraguay and Bolivia, as well as with very conservative groups in North America, this community has no substantial transnational network, which is rooted in entrepreneurial exchanges. Some of the families presently living in Upper Barton Creek and Springfield have their roots in other Mennonite groups, including the Kleine Gemeinde from Spanish Lookout. But because of the ideologically and religiously different perspectives on the interpretation of the Holy Scripture and how this interpretation is fulfilled in the way of life, there is not a strong link based on these kinship relations. The deacon of Springfield told that he did not recognise the Kleine Gemeinde of Spanish Lookout as Mennonites because they were too worldly in the eyes of the Springfield community. On the other hand Spanish Lookout is a community where there is always some shortage of workers, so when somebody from Springfield is in need of a temporary job he or she can make advantage of these family ties. Being a member of larger Mennonite 'family' and being a distant relative is a guarantee for work.

## *5.2 Community 2: Shipyard*

Shipyard is, together with Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek, one of the oldest Mennonite communities in Belize. It is situated in the North of the country in the Orange Walk district, approximately an one-hour drive from Orange Walk Town. Shipyard was founded already in the first year of Mennonite migration to Belize, in 1958. After a schism in the Old Colony Church in Blue Creek over the use of technology, the more conservative members of the church left Blue Creek and started the community of Shipyard some 25 km eastwards.

Shipyard stretches over an area of 17083 acres, consisting of 26 different local districts, which are called camps. The community is led by an Oberschultze or Vorsteher (the colony administrator) and each camp is led by a Schulze who is, just like the Oberschultze, elected for two years. Each camp reflects something of a little independent entity within the community with their own school.

“The real power in the Colony, however, is held by the *Lehrdienst* (church council): six *Prediger* (Minister) and the *Alteste* (Elder or Bishop). All of them are elected for life by the *Bruderschaft* (all male baptized, hence adult members of the Altkolony Church).” (Scharinger-Plasil, 2004, p.55)

In 2004 the internal Shipyard census mentions 2664 inhabitants, but this number is misleading because the excommunicated families are not included. In 2004 there were around 20 families, which is approximately 150 people, in Shipyard who were excommunicated for not living by the rules of the *Ordnung* and for being disobedient to the authority of the church council (Roessingh and Plasil, 2006).

Shipyard has for some years now, in contrast to Springfield, been confronted with an internal religious schism. The *Kleine Gemeinde* church from Spanish Lookout and the progressive Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC), which has its headquarters in Manitoba (Canada) and a church in Blue Creek have slowly started to enter the Shipyard community. The Old Colony Mennonites of Shipyard do not accept people who are member of one of these churches. They avoid them because they are excommunicated from the Old Colony church. Communities like Shipyard protect their religious values and try to live according to their traditional farming systems.

Shipyard is an agriculturally based community, which is clearly not very economically successful. Most houses are small and modest. The farmhouses lie some distance away from the unpaved main roads. The barns and stores are sober without any eye-catching billboards or advertising signs. In contrast to Springfield there is a kind of uniformity in the construction of the houses, which gives the impression of equality and that there is no big social economic gap between the inhabitants.

The area of Shipyard is rather flat with cultivated fields alternated with pastureland. Most people in Shipyard make a living from agriculture, livestock or agriculturally related labour. The main crops cultivated are beans, corn, rice and soybeans. The cattle and chicken farmers in Shipyard produce their meat for the Belizean market. Most families have also some cows, chicken, pigs and occasionally sheep for private consumption. Some people have a job as employee in the feed mill or in the slaughterhouse. There are two feed mills and two slaughterhouses within the community. Most farmers sell their products to one of the feed mills and/or slaughterhouses from where the products are sold all over Belize. Those who do not make their living in agriculture or agriculturally related work, mainly earn their money in the furniture manufacturing, as electricians, shopkeepers or as mechanics in Shipyard or by doing wage labour in Blue Creek, Spanish Lookout, Orange Walk or Belize City.

For some decennia the farmers of Shipyard are confronted with a notorious shortage of land, which makes it difficult for young couples to find their own property. In the 1970s there was a split in the community, when many Old Colony Mennonites moved away to a new area in the Toledo district, which was called Little Belize and to another place near Shipyard by the name of Indian Creek.

Shipyard, Little Belize and Indian Creek are all traditional Old Colony based communities where the influence of modernity is integrated very slowly (Roessingh and Plasil, 2006). Mennonites in these communities use horse drawn wagons, because they are not allowed to drive automobiles. On the fields they use tractors with iron tyres, because rubber tyres are forbidden. The Old Colony Mennonites have strict clothing codes, which make them very visible outside their community. Not only for non-Mennonites and for other Mennonites but also for other Old Colony Mennonites from other communities in Belize and outside Belize.

Most Old Colony Mennonites are embedded in transnational networks. These networks are mainly based on ideological religious exchange and family visits. For the Shipyard Mennonites these networks includes brother communities in Canada, USA, Mexico and Bolivia. Because of a lifestyle which is also based on interaction with people from outside the community and a more differentiated agricultural related entrepreneurial system, the Mennonites of Shipyard are more visible on the Belizean marked then the Springfield Mennonites. Interesting is what role the internal religious differentiation will have on the possibilities for social and economic changes inside the community in the future.

### *5.3 Community 3: Spanish Lookout*

Visitors to Spanish Lookout have three roads to enter the community. Two are bumpy, dusty and not paved. One of these two roads, which is the short cut, passes the Belize River. This road is connected through a hand-operated ferry. The third road was paved in 2005 and is mainly used by the ingoing and outgoing freight traffic. When driving into the community one seems to enter a different world within Belize. The community has developed into an extensive area with farms surrounded by numerous acres of land. What used to be a dense jungle is now a hilly area with pastures where the Mennonites raise cattle and cultivate corn and beans. A beautiful valley with the best-paved road of Belize, connecting the southern part of the village with the northern end. The houses are built in such a matter, that the economic position of the house owner is reflected in the building. "We're growing Belize" is the slogan on a billboard of Reimers Feed Mill alongside the main road through Spanish Lookout. This billboard is a symbol of the entrepreneurial identity of the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. We are growing Belize. This slogan claims an image of self-confidence. Peculiar in this case is that the Mennonites, who are known for their sober, modest and traditional way of life, would use such an eye-catching slogan. Within the community one will find important agro-businesses like Friesen Hatcheries, Reimers Feedmill, Quality Poultry Products, Western Tractor Supply, Western Dairies and Bel Car Export. This is an important company in Belize, because next to importing beans it also exports beans throughout the Caribbean. Beside this, there are several hardware stores like Hillside Welding Centre, Koop Metal, Universal Hardware and other companies, like Pletts Home Builders, Loewen Furniture. In fact the Mennonites of Spanish Lookout are with the Mennonites from Blue Creek commonly regarded as the economic motor of Belize.

Spanish Lookout stretches over an area of 20,978 acres, consisting of four *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonite districts. Each district has its own minister and deacon. On the secular level the community is led by the *Vorsteher* committee or the colony administration. This committee of three men is elected for a period of three years. Spanish Lookout has around 1600 inhabitants and is known in Belize as a progressive

Mennonite settlement because these Mennonites use a differentiated economic system of commercial agriculture and agribusiness in their community. The beans, dairy and chicken companies of this community for instance, are important businesses in the country. Their transport and distribution network is based on well-organised system, which runs beyond the borders of the community (Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd, 2005). In cities like Belmopan, Belize City and Orange Walk, the Spanish Lookout Mennonites have their transshipment company, which is managed by a Mennonite family from Spanish Lookout. The Mennonite entrepreneurs from Spanish Lookout have a transnational network, which is also dispersed among Mennonite communities across North America.

The Spanish Lookout community has evolved from an isolated group of families dependent on subsistence agriculture and logging, into a more complex economy with commercial agriculture and agribusiness as its primary engines of growth (Higdon, 1997). The Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites of Spanish Lookout do not have strong rules in their acceptance of technology. They own tractors, trucks, caterpillars, automobiles and they use electricity, computers. Although Spanish Lookout is known as a progressive Mennonite community, the Kleine Gemeinde church has strict rules about behaviour, values and norms.

When the Kleine Gemeinde started its community in Belize in 1958, it was a very homogeneous group with shared norms and values. Especially the last ten years this has been changing, due to several causes. One of them is the influence of the migration flow to Northern America. Many people in Spanish Lookout have family or friends in Canada and the USA. As a result of the migration flow of the Mennonites a network is created in a sense of goods, but also in a sense of knowledge and religion. This means that the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites of Spanish Lookout, although traditionally inward focused, are also aware of and connected to the world outside the community. Due to their entrepreneurial initiatives and internal cooperation the Mennonites of Spanish Lookout are one of the economic leading ethnic groups in Belize. It might be argued that their transnational network has contributed to their entrepreneurial success. On the other hand one can argue that their transnational network initiated an internal religious differentiation.

Some eight years ago the EMMC was founded in Spanish Lookout. Initially the EMMC church from Blue Creek assisted the EMMC church in Spanish Lookout. The ideas of the EMMC seems to be less strict and they give the impression that they have a more open view towards influences from the outside world then the Kleine Gemeinde church. In practice this means that there is some disturbance in the community because the inner relations and structures are at stake. Nonetheless the Kleine Gemeinde church is still dominant and the most influential in the Spanish Lookout community.

## **6 Conclusion**

When the Mennonites arrived in Belize in 1958, their motives were first of all based on religious principles and the need for agricultural land. A strong internal cohesion gave them the advantage they needed to settle and to develop as a prosperous agricultural community. Trust and recognition inside the Mennonite communities are fundamental aspects to create this cohesion.

“The cohesive Mennonite community (the village) is designed to care for its members. There is mutuality of recognition; regular and mutual affirmation and certification. The Old Colony Mennonite village becomes a hallowed place.” (Driedger, 2000, p. 72)

Driedger points out that trust and recognition within the Mennonite community are based on fundamental elements out of the past, which are continuously transplanted from one location to another. Given the historically grown relations within the larger Mennonites ‘family’, one can not see one community as a homogenous entity, inhabited by members of only one single Mennonite church. The communities described above indicate that a community generally entails different churches and include for instance both Old Colony and more progressive Mennonites. The dominance of a specific church has a large influence on the community. It became clear that the communities where the more progressive churches (Kleine Gemeinde and EMMC) dominate have a different attitude towards the outside world. These communities, Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek, generally have a more extensive transnational network. The scope of the transnational network of a community is related to the extent to which this community is influenced by the outside world. In other words, the level of entrepreneurial possibilities is related to the contacts outside the own community. To illustrate: Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek have the most extensive transnational network and they are also the most progressive communities in the sense of their entrepreneurial activities. Interestingly enough, it seems as if this strong level of Mennonite entrepreneurial activities also influences the economic position of the Belizean society as a whole. Spanish Lookout and Blue Creek both have a strong economic position and an intensive economic exchange beyond their community, while the other Mennonite communities, such as Springfield and Shipyard, are much more inward focused.

Thus the communities can be divided according to their ‘progressiveness’. Most conservative are the Amish Mennonite people Springfield, who broke away over issues like the interpretation of the Bible, leadership and the use of electricity and machinery, from already very conservative communities. The second stage on the ‘ladder of progressiveness’ (both in life style and religious belief) is occupied by the Old Colony Mennonites of Shipyard. However Shipyard is not a homogenous Old Colony community anymore, influences from outside, such as the foundation of the EMMC church in the community, has had its impact on internal cohesion. Spanish Lookout is considered to be a progressive community, although they are also not a homogenous communities.

Another way to divide the Mennonites in Belize is along ties of their different churches, the conservative Amish Mennonite church, the traditional Old Colony, the more progressive ones who allow rubber tyres on their tractors and use computers, the Kleine Gemeinde, the EMMC and those who left the Anabaptist religion all together. In the Spanish Lookout and Shipyard communities are different churches present, this is not the case in Springfield, there is one church, the Amish Mennonite church.

The case of Mennonites in Belize shows us that the influence of churches and business organisations outside the community can create internal religious differentiation. This differentiation does not necessarily have a paralysing effect on the entrepreneurial development and expansion. On the contrary, many of the businesses in Spanish Lookout have a powerful position in Belize. One of the interesting aspects of this powerful position in the Belizean entrepreneurial arena is that the Mennonites for a long time acted in a rather isolated way within Belize. But because of changing circumstances they can not live in total separation from Belizean society. Matters like taxes, fuel exemptions and



agricultural innovations are already common in meetings between Spanish Lookout and Shipyard leaders and Belizean politicians. Although different religious views exist within Spanish Lookout, the internal cohesion of the people in the community is still strong enough to maintain successful cooperation and business relationships. What is more, there seems to be a new collective identity arising, based on a shared entrepreneurial point of view and mutual acceptance. In the way they practice their agricultural activities and their entrepreneurial activities they are able to maintain a strong bond of trust, which is still typically Mennonite. This is different in Shipyard where the inhabitants are divided into groups of Old Colony Mennonites and excommunicated Old Colony Mennonites, who turned to other Mennonite churches. In this case there is no cooperation between the two groups. The people of excommunicated group still live in the community but they are more depended on their entrepreneurial relations outside the community. Some of them are doing remarkable well, others have to struggle to keep the work going. In Springfield live is much more centralised around the rules of the church, the entrepreneurial activities are small scale and people depend on the cohesion within the community.

To conclude, internal religious differentiation does not always result in significant changes in the entrepreneurial relations within and outside the community. Although the religious differentiation has significant impacts on the intrinsic level of community life and thus on internal trust as in the case of Shipyard, in the case of the Mennonites in Spanish Lookout it seems as if the economic and family bonds are far too important to let the religious differences interfere. Rather, they are keeping the religious aspects of community life within the church, while continuing the business as usual. However, what can be concluded from the descriptions of these three communities is that there seems to be a correlation between the level of entrepreneurial activity, the contacts with the outside world and level of progressiveness.

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